China India
Imaginings and Transformations

Pablo Bartholomew, Kate Beynon, Shobha Broota, Dongwang Fan, Li Li, DLN Reddy, Sangeeta Sandrasegar, Xu Wang, Guan Wei

Macquarie University Art Gallery
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New geopolitical formations with the emergence of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries, especially China and India, have profound consequences for Australian aspirations in the Asian Region. The White Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century* builds on an earlier Labor platform under the Keating Government entitled *Australia in Asia and Asia in Australia*. The role of culture as ‘soft power’ can only be underlined once again. Artists have the creative energy to pave new pathways adding critical value to the political or economic mileage.
Australian universities have witnessed the erosion of their funding base resulting in the scramble for Asian students and the wealth they bring in to support a weakened higher educational system. At the same time, Australia’s creative industries have forged ahead despite economic challenges building on artistic engagements with Asia. In this context, University Art Museums have become critical as sites for inter-cultural dialogue.

Macquarie University led the formation of the International Committee for University Museums and Collections by the International Council of Museums. Imaginings and Transformations continues this rich tradition of commitment to situate the academy in the international arena through artists that can seamlessly traverse the cultural, economic, social and environmental domains of sustainability.

As the exhibition curators have stated, Imaginings and Transformations explores the notion of tradition as a mechanism for artistic innovation over a generational time period. The group selection of artists have engaged in this process of transformation in a variety of ways – in the re-mixing, re-working of motifs, socio-political statements – where social and political unrest remains despite the superpower status – hybrid practices and diasporas have come to represent the imaginings of the future where hegemonic concepts of modernity and postmodernity no longer hold sway.

Imagining the trajectories of the future with China and India at the helm awakens us to new ways of transformative engagements, where the intersections of art, history and culture eclipse the long held stereotypes and politics of representation. China, India or even Australia are more than the influential powers, they could well become the triangulation of a regional formation to foster creativity in new and exciting ways.

Macquarie University Art Gallery must be commended for its ongoing commitment to use the exhibition as a tool for promoting the ‘power of culture’ in Australia’s regional engagement. I take great pleasure in commending the artists: Pablo Bartholomew, Kate Beynon, Shobha Broota, Dongwang Fan, Li Li, DLN Reddy, Sangeeta Sandrasegar, Xu Wang and Guan Wei; curators: Rhonda Davis, Gina Hammond and Leonard Janiszewski, and Professor John Simons Executive Dean, Faculty of Arts.

Professor Amareswar Galla, PhD
Executive Director, International Institute for the Inclusive Museum, Copenhagen & Former Vice President, International Council of Museums, Paris

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Drifting to Asia

One universal constant in natural and human systems is the certainty of change. Anything that appears to feign a sense of fixity is usually a metaphysical trick or a chronological aberration, flux is fundamental and ubiquitous.

The inner forces of the planet drive the shifting jigsaw on the surface. In our distant geological past, our continent was part of the cold, white landmass of Antarctica. Now cut loose from these ancient Gondwanaan moorings we move inexorably, a few centimetres each year, northwards into lower latitudes. In our distant geological future Australia will bulldoze up the archipelagos in our path before becoming welded into the giant landmass of Asia, a journey covering thousands of kilometres over a vast ocean basin.

The drift from our past cold white place into the chaos and diversity of the tropics is like the journey from a monocultural, Eurocentric past to a multicultural destination of many voices, varied world views, and a melting pot of transnational identities. It is a journey over similar vast distances.

The gold rushes in our colonial history were early phases of globalisation, a trickle that was to turn into a torrent. Where Anglo-Celtic miners once rallied and rioted against Chinese miners who, like them, attempted to extract a living from working the earth, there are now vast holes in the ground that are fuelling the rapid industrialisation of the new Asian powerhouses. The xenophobia of the Immigration Act and the White Australia policy, anachronistic totems, now fade in the light of large scale economic opportunity, despite the occasional faint resonance in the modern Australian body politic.
The recent release of *Australia in the Asian Century* is an attempt to instil our northward drift with aspiration and purpose to maximise our potential in a future narrative of engagement. It will be a future of new multi-faceted identities where many will transition out of poverty accompanied by a marked increase in material and cultural production and consumption. People will live longer in greater numbers with all the implications this entails for stretched supplies of food and water. It will be a future where the biodiversity and climate systems of the planet will be determined by the collective action of one aberrant primate species. It will be a future of increased flows of information and escalating levels of connectivity where transient groups coalesce in cyberspace only to continuously dissolve and regroup, relationships will fuel an increasing desire for intangible experiences over tangible products leading to complex new social ecologies.¹

We are moving from ‘the tyranny of distance to the prospects of proximity’ demanding broader and deeper engagement.²

We are urged to develop Asian literacy throughout our society. There are obvious implications for education, business, skills development and our capacity for innovation. Nowhere is this more important than through the agency of museum and gallery spaces and the training and development of the curatorial practitioners, artists, collectors and interpreters who will work with them. As places of discourse and inter-cultural exchange and engagement, these are the future incubators of meaningful understanding and active citizenship. They are transcendent portals to the new world.

**Dr Andrew Simpson**

¹ These general points are detailed in Hajkowicz, S.A., Cook, H. & Littleboy, A. 2012. *Our future world: Global megatrends that will change the way we live. The 2012 Revision.* CSIRO, Australia.

left:
Guan Wei
Cloud P#3
2012
bronze
Ed. 2/3
160.0 x 100.0 x 90.0 cm
Collection Gary Sands
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
left:
DLN Reddy
Untitled (Image detail)
2011
brass
250.0 x 45.0 x 45.0 cm
On loan to Macquarie University Sculpture Park
Courtesy of the artist
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
Chinese Indians or Indian Chinese

It was during the time when I went to work with the filmmaker Satyajit Ray on sets of *Shatranje Ke Khilari* (‘The Chess Players’) in 1976. Working as a stills photographer I spent a lot of time in Calcutta in the Tollygunje Studios. For me, this was re-engaging with a city – but a very different kind from the one that I spent as a child accompanying my mother on her summer visits to see her mother.

It was stifling on the studio sets – film shootings had that effect on me. It was therapeutic to get away and wander the streets, to feed the inner churning, and it was a way to deal with my own sense of being of mixed origin and feeling marginal.

It was this feeling that drove me to explore the Tangra and Dhapa areas of South Calcutta. Photographing amongst the Chinese community – or whatever fragments of them that remained. Their exodus from India had already begun, brutally mistreated especially after the hate reaction that developed against them, seeing them as enemy people, a way to deal with a national humiliation felt because India lost war to China in 1962. Many were interned in prison camps in Deoli in Rajasthan.

The Chinese army marched into upper Assam all the way to Tezpur in the North Eastern part of India. So for the political and military blunders that our country made, the Chinese Indian populations suffered, particularly in Calcutta – a community that had lived for generations, coming here as migrants from mainland China in search of a better life ever since the late 18th century.
By Christmas of 1978, around the time I finished taking these photographs, nearly a decade and a half had passed since the Sino-Indian war, but there was always the occurrence of someone’s relative or a friend who had migrated or relocated. It was their escape from being constantly judged. Even after the release from the prison camps, though not openly persecuted, they had to live with slurs of suspicion that enveloped them as the enemy or the ‘other’.

Many of those whom I had photographed in the previous year had since left for Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. Leaving India to find a new life with more equal opportunities and better economic prosperity, gave them a new lease of life. Breaking those stereotypical roles of past generations that saw them live and work as shoemakers, laundrymen, small dentists and low-end restaurant owners I could imagine was liberating.

My engagement with the Haka Chinese community in the Tangra area, this group who lived, owned and ran leather tanneries – and in a diminished way, still continue to do – was my first endeavor to document a community in transition, coming to terms with themselves, marginal, closed yet proud, and friendly towards me. It was also, in a way, an opportunity to explore my mixed Indian Burmese origins and find a way to deal with an inner restlessness that started to occur in my late teens and early twenties.

Pablo Bartholomew
Pablo Bartholomew: The Human Art of Photography

[Photography] is the mortal enemy of Art... If photography is allowed to stand in for Art in some of its functions it will soon supplant or corrupt it completely... It must return to its real task, which is to be the servant of the sciences and of the arts, but a very humble servant.¹

Charles Baudelaire, French poet and critic, 1859

Three years after Baudelaire’s condemnation of photography as Art, a French court publicly declared quite the opposite. The intrinsic aesthetic power of the photographic image has since been – despite further initial challenges – indefatigably recognised, politicised, commercialised, but not homogenised or disenfranchised, as an Art form. Its ability to move well-beyond scientific recording, to be utilised as a unique and legitimate aesthetic medium, is firmly evidenced in Pablo Bartholomew’s photographic documentary series Chinese Indians or Indian Chinese. Significantly, Bartholomew’s selection of 27 black and white images from the much larger complete series, serves to remind the viewer that photography can be a source of intense visual pleasure and delight (revealing fresh, new, and at times, beguiling aesthetic realities), as well as a means of illuminating social and political changes, challenges and issues (often in the hope of enticing re-consideration and generating consequent reforming actions).

In the late 1970s Bartholomew focussed his camera lens upon the daily lives of the Haka Chinese community in the Tangra and Dhapa areas of South Calcutta. The community, an Indian enclave of the global Chinese diaspora, was at a sharp point of dramatic transition. Since the hostilities of the Sino–Indian War of the early 1960s, tensions had persisted, festered and conspired to achieve a result through indifference and intolerance, that military violence could not – an exodus of the Chinese from Indian ‘territory’. Numerous members of the Haka Chinese community had already left for other foreign lands that were relatively more welcoming, and many more – including some of those whom Bartholomew photographed – were soon to depart.
The personal narratives within each individual photograph provide an intimate and human insight into the daily working and private lives of those portrayed. Collectively, the series evidences the ambiguous ‘whose master, whose man?’ circumstance being enacted by the meeting points between the Chinese and Indian communities – the Chinese operated tanneries and employed Indian workers, but despite their business ownership and control, they were politically, socially and culturally isolated. This was a time when culture and national identity were tightly intertwined. Transnational identities were privately held at bay, publicly imprisoned by an overlay of nationalistic, self-serving, political and cultural loyalties, that had been indoctrinated through Cold War propaganda.

Bartholomew’s selection of images has a broader emphasis towards the Chinese community – revealing and sensitively revelling in their activities as individuals and as a group. The Indians are essentially portrayed in their roles as workers, and a contrast is clearly articulated between the material prosperity of the Chinese compared to their employees. Yet the urban environment they both share is Dickensian in character – not a tree or ‘green’ space is evident, squalor and filth abounds; sunlight filters difficultly through a heavy, grey smoke haze; the tallest structures are factory chimneys dispensing the pollutant mist; people are servants to the grind and grime of industry.

Yet, beauty abounds. The compositional elements of each photo are carefully and meticulously considered. The masterful playfulness of the photographer with diminishing light – skilfully captured, delineated, and contrasted against harsh light and shade – is visually stunning. The textual surfaces are enhanced by the unashamed presence of grain within the images (the photos were shot with a 35mm analogue camera using fast film).

But the beauty that these photographs hold goes much further. They creatively tell human stories, both personal and collective in nature. They also provide aesthetic narratives of the synergetic empathy that binds the photographer to his subjects, and the subjects to each other – their shared humanity, and all that it entails.

In the end, this is perhaps the most valuable, the most beautiful, of our earthly delights.

Leonard Janiszewski

left:
Pablo Bartholomew
**Chinese Indians or Indian Chinese series**
**Tangra, Calcutta**
Boy jumping off a rooftop
c.1975
inkjet black and white photograph
23.57 x 15.57 cm
Courtesy of the artist
above:
Pablo Bartholomew
Chinese Indians or Indian Chinese series
Tangra, Calcutta
Inside a tannery
c.1975
inkjet black and white photograph
23.57 x 15.57 cm
Courtesy of the artist
above:
Pablo Bartholomew
**Chinese Indians or Indian Chinese series**
**Tangra, Calcutta**
Workers at leather washing drums
c.1975
inkjet black and white photograph
23.57 x 15.57 cm
Courtesy of the artist
The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice...

The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.¹

Arjun Appadurai

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Talismans. Charms. Amulets. Protective animals. Shared within and across families and linguistic communities, they possess rich domestic and public social lives. They are part of the renewal of generational and geographical ties to heritage and homeland. Materially diverse, they are also border-crossing travellers making up the global flow or mediascape of crafted images. These objects also represent global imaginary for those within and without ethnoscape, those global movements and relocations of people and their cultural ties and associations.²

For Melbourne-based artist Kate Beynon (b. 1970) the experiences of those who are in between dominant histories, languages and forms of storytelling needs to be reimagined and recrafted. Personal history, family and place are strong influences on identity and belonging, so maintaining connection between different cultures, traditions and places becomes even more defining of how heritage can shape artistic practice. Born in Hong Kong to a Welsh father and a Malaysian-born Chinese mother and migrating from Hong Kong to Singapore, Germany, and England before arriving to Australia, Beynon’s work explores her ‘mixed’ background through the global media flow of visual culture shaping transcultural practices: anime, manga, traditional Chinese mythology, art and calligraphy and contemporary fashion.³
With *Big Dragon Guardian* (2009) the overwhelming dragon face, resplendent with blue hues, looms large as an elemental spirit companion and guardian of the young Tai Chi sword carrying Warrior Woman. But it also reflects Beynon’s Welsh background as dragons feature in Celtic lore and visual design. Similarly, the young Warrior Woman is not only a female reworking of traditional Chinese representations of male guardians but also an incarnation of the young women that are recurring subjects in Beynon’s work. Strong, independent and ethnically indeterminate, they have adopted visual and storied elements from traditional Chinese culture in contemporary settings. But they also embody physical and generational distance from such culture through the ‘mixed’ heritage of parent cultures and migration. *Big Dragon Guardian* shows us the cultural work of the imaginary through identification with Chineseness informing the lived experience of gender, race and place.

*Lotus Qi Gong Goddess* (2010) continues this cultural work. Chinese and Japanese symbols and artefacts – Yin-Yang, Maneki-neko the Japanese Welcoming Cat, a Chinese sword – as well as the western peace symbol are arranged above and below anti-anxiety flower charms. The central female figure in a golden body suit, is a Guardian Goddess for the everyday, her hands assuming the lotus pose from the life energy techniques of Qi Gong. The winged dog she calmly floats above is both an incarnation of a traditional guardian spirit and the canine companion of the artist’s family. The addition of the decorated skull from Mexican folk art is an object which also offers protection and good luck. The radiant lines emanating from the Qi Gong Goddess invoke another transcultural example of Mexican visual culture, namely the powerful female icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Like that icon’s combination of traditional Christian motifs with indigenous imagery – symbolic of *mestizaje*, the shaping of identity and tradition through racial and cultural mixing – Beynon’s hybrid guardian Goddess provides happiness and protection for global citizens.

*Jason Davis*

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above:
Kate Beynon
**Big Dragon Guardian**
2009
acrylic and aerosol on canvas
150.0 x 150.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite

*China India* Imaginings and Transformations
above:
Kate Beynon
Lotus Qi Gong Goddess
2010
acrylic & Swarovski crystals on linen
100.0 cm diameter
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
As an artist I was always interested in the play of colour, light, movement and rhythm; and then varying forms were revealed to me in consonance with my different experiences in life.

In the long pursuit of artistic creations, my endeavours as a painter passed through a lot of changes. I painted portraits, human forms, birds, animals, insects, and varying elements of nature – water, air and space – and anything else that could give expression to my inner feelings – I drew and painted different forms which pulsate with organic energy. For years this orchestration of light and movement was somewhat loose. Then these elements got focused towards a centre, resulting in concentric circles and the spirals, with light emanating from the centre. Now, the energy has taken a new direction. This endless flowing energy knows no boundaries and flows ceaselessly creating numerous expressions.

My creative impulse is leading me towards the inner core of my being, the cardinal point of cosmic reference, from where it bursts forth in numerous artistic creations. The joy I receive, or hope to receive through God’s grace and luck, is the vibration of this cosmic energy that throbs within the heart of the mysterious universe.

Shobha Broota
Shobha Broota’s search into the mystical realms of the universe, the palpable energy forces underlying the earth’s atmosphere are clearly manifest in the paintings she has been producing over the past twenty years. Steeped within the cultural traditions of India, Broota combines those practices with approaches borne of Western modernity in creating a body of work distinctive and reflective to a mode of abstraction that is both referential and conceptual.

Broota lives and works in New Delhi, a place that has afforded a multiplicity of experiences that the artist has relished over her lifetime ‘from natural phenomena,... audio and visual exposures to music, architecture, sculpture, colour, texture and design’ elements which all resonate throughout her works. She is able to play out those elements in a process of transformation that reflects the words of the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel when he stated, ‘[E]verything spiritual is better than anything natural. At any rate, no existence in nature is able, like art, to represent divine ideals.’ Broota’s excursion into abstraction in her latest works investigates the aesthetics of texture in recalling Indian weaving practices and designs. Abstraction as a modality has had a strong affiliation and history with the applied arts – particularly since the time of the Bauhaus – forging the modernist vernacular into the realm of interior decorating.

Oblique references to Mark Rothko’s work can be made to Broota’s minimalist, colour-saturated works. The artist’s works share a meditative quality in bringing the viewer closer to experiencing the stillness of life here and the infinity of time that lies beyond. Yet, Broota’s works are imbued with relational aesthetics – the engagement with social spaces that stems from a cultural immersion with her birthplace of India.
Broota’s latest works are explorations delving into the interiority of light, space and time. Her distillation of colour (she is adept in ‘throwing’ it against the ground of her material) conjures the earth as a living entity – a visual dialogue steeped in the sensuousness of colour and the luminosity of light. Reduced and pared down to simple forms using restraint, shifting patterns and movements within an expansive and radiating field, these works deflect conditions that we rely upon at a normal perceptual level. Straight lines are softened, colour nuanced as if suspended in space, textures unified, illusions of space created as if alighting to the ideals of Buddhist thought, are some of the renditions that transpire when a prolonged looking takes place for the viewer. The concentric spirals enliven the surface with a performative quality that conjures a ritualised sacred space. This transcendental quality infused within the works draws the viewer into a succession of spaces undetermined by the measures of time. The light, emanating from within, opens a transient passageway leading towards a set of contemplative possibilities that bypass the tangibles of being and knowing within this world.

It seems that the art of Shobha Broota is contemporaneous to our current societal conditions where the search for meaning and spiritual nourishment is beginning to take precedence over accumulating material wealth. This need has certainly increased since the impact of the global financial crisis crippled advanced economies throughout the world. In this context, Broota’s works can be seen as a meditation on our present existence, an escape from the harsh realities in looking towards the light of a much brighter future.

Rhonda Davis
above:
Shobha Broota
Untitled No. 9
2012
91.44 x 91.44 cm
Courtesy of the artist
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
left: Shobha Broota
Untitled No. 4
2012
121.92 x 121.92 cm
Courtesy of the artist
Photography Effy Alexakis, Photowrite

above: Shobha Broota
Untitled No. 8
2012
121.92 x 121.92 cm
Courtesy of the artist
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
Dongwang Fan

**Dragon In Water**

These paintings and short video is about the great changes of the Chinese dragon: its land, people and culture.

In contemporary China the dragon’s rise represents the current revival of China’s cultural identity. As a folk religion icon that developed over China’s cultural history, the dragon is just, benevolent, but also fearsome and powerful in battling against evil spirits to protect its believers in bringing them wealth and good fortune.

The Chinese dragons are aquatic creatures living in water with fluid and hybrid identities, using their wisdom to navigate the terrain of ongoing change. Here, the water is the environment, the agent for change. The video scenes have complex layers as though the dragon is travelling between many different realms. *Dragon in Water* dissolves and transforms the old into the new. Changes are everywhere in China: old and new; light and dark; inside and outside; cold and warm; family and friends; old and young; rich and poor; eastern and western; socialist and Buddhist; low culture and high culture; creation and destruction; sadness and happiness; life and death. In these changes the dragon has not diminished but re-emerged on an unprecedented level.

Finally, this traditional Chinese icon has developed into a new kind of postmodern dragon: one that has been disintegrated and reintegrated. This icon of power and protection acquires and contributes to a new meaning of capitalism and globalisation.

**Dr Dongwang Fan**
Re-imagining the Dragon

The fusion of traditional Chinese iconography with Western pop culture stylistic elements so noticeable in the earlier works of Fan Dongwang have evolved, reflecting the continuity of change that is inherent within all extant cultures. There is subtleness in his latest work *Dragon in Water* – mesmerizing viewers to experience the depths of the Dragon’s metamorphosis – phasing in and out of this water realm. The re-emergence and re-positioning of Fan’s Dragon, sees it no longer as a representation of the emperor’s unchallenged power and authority as it once was historically, but as indicative of the vitality of a modern Chinese cultural identity – an aspect which is captured in these transitionary works.

The only constant is change. As a global citizen, Dongwang continues to move back and forward between China and Australia – which has allowed him a unique insight into the changing role of the Dragon across a broad cultural spectrum. More than just an exercise in cross-cultural literacy, the constantly shifting landscape of perspectives and unique visual language the artist has developed offers an opportunity to engage at a truly intercultural interface that is transformative.

I asked Anita Chang to write about Dr Fan Dongwang’s work a couple of years ago because of her research interests in Chinese calligraphy and painting, social and cultural changes in China, as well as teaching the history of Chinese art. A great supporter of the work of artists such as Dongwang, it is with great regret that we learnt of her passing this year. Included here is a brief excerpt from her writings, because of its continued relevance to the power of Fan Dongwang’s work and because of the deep reverence the university has for the legacy Anita Chang has left behind.

Gina Hammond
Encountering the Dragon

Being a lecturer on the courses such as ‘History of Chinese Arts’ and ‘Chinese Calligraphy’ and a student of comparative Chinese and Western literature, I must say that I was impressed by Dr Dongwang Fan’s paintings which gave me a collective image of a euphemistic bridge across two supreme cultures.

In 2001, I was joined with Professor John Yu and others to view Dongwang’s dragons at Casula Powerhouse Centre. I felt then, that Fan was daring in the way he was breaking through certain barriers of traditional Chinese paintings, to depict works that intermingled tradition with Western skills aligned with that of making sculptures.

The complexity of Dongwang’s thinking can be read through his other paintings that range from the representation of human body fragments to penetrating tapestry-type drawings. Both approaches wrestle with ideas among Confucianism, Maoism and Christianity; and humanism against mechanism. Those silent outcries are found everywhere in Fan’s paintings, presented in rich colours utilising a modern technique of ‘3-D volume on a 2-D surface’. I can see what Fan described as, ‘painting as relief sculpture’ which gives the artist a process of reframing his identity in order to attain harmony as most significant to his evolving development as a contemporary artist.

Fan’s paintings become emblems of cross-cultural engagement and tolerance.

In the 21st century, Australia emerges as a shining star in the Pacific realm with a role to play in linking Asian with that of European cultures.

Anita Chang
above:
Dongwang Fan
*Dragon In Water*
2012
acrylic on canvas
180.0 x 428.0 cm overall triptych
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Clayton Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
above:
Dongwang Fan
**Dragon In Water**
2012

acrylic on canvas
middle panel 180.0 x 180.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Clayton Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
above:
Dongwang Fan
**Dragon In Water**
2012
acrylic on canvas
left panel 120.0 x 180.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Clayton Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite

above:
Dongwang Fan
**Dragon In Water**
2012
acrylic on canvas
right panel 120.0 x 180.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Clayton Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
Li Li emerged from the painting department at the Sichuan Institute of Fine Art in Chongqing in the mid-2000s. She was part of a movement of young artists whose imagery was informed by the iconography of Japanese animation that was prevalent on Chinese television and in print since the late 1990s. Li Li was born in 1982 and thus never knew the social construct of the Cultural Revolution or China under Mao. She and her contemporaries are part of the first wave of artists to emerge in the ‘New China’, where political control has not necessarily diminished but is certainly less overtly oppressive.

While the Chinese economy grows, its metropolises expand at a rapid pace. Australia has enjoyed a decade of China’s hunger for iron ore because our resource is essential for making the steel required to reinforce the thousands of skyscrapers that populate a city like Chongqing. Chongqing is a teeming, ‘Bladerunnersesque’ environ on the banks of the Yangtze River. With a population of thirty million and growing, the hills around the Southwestern mountain city have been consumed by the urban march expanding within the memory of one generation. Li Li is an artist with an eye on the environmental impact of China’s growth. Many of the Beijing artists, preoccupied with social politics, have been neglectful of the enormous impact ‘progress’ has had on the dwindling natural environment around them. One of her SIFA mentors, Yang Jinsong – an artist renowned in his own right for his large exploding watermelon and rotting fish paintings – is another painter whose work warns of the environmental dangers of China’s unstoppable expansion and has been an evident influence.
Li Li presented her trademark, cartoon-like destructive ‘self-portrait’ in the suite of works that travelled to Australia for the 2009 exhibition *Sichuan Hot!*, presented at both Griffith University and Ray Hughes Gallery. Evident is the self-conscious notion of collective devastation. In two images her character is depicted consuming or incinerating a rainbow, and in a third work, devouring a forest. The most striking of the works from this series is in a corporate collection in Melbourne (*The Destruction of 100,000 Tons No. 2*). It depicts the character; the hungry young girl – her own icon for China, joyously clutching and chewing on anime panda bears (natural symbols of China). This image is at once amusing, playful and violently disturbing. As China consumes itself, buries itself in steel whilst removing all of its forestry, youthful artists such as Li Li use their own visual language to remind people that the country belongs to the young too, and without preservation, there won’t be much left for the next generation.

**Evan Hughes**
above:
Li Li
The Destruction of 100,000 Tons No. 1
2005
acrylic on canvas
130.0 x 180.0 cm
Courtesy of The Hughes Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
above:

Li Li

What is Natural? No. 2

2006

acrylic on canvas
100.0 x 120.0 cm

Courtesy of The Hughes Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
DLN Reddy

In and Out
– Abstraction and the Figurative

Art need not be restricted by medium. I try and create in a way that the viewer can get a feeling from the shape. This rhythmic build up of the form is certainly ambiguous enough to make the viewer comfortable in making their own interpretation based on what they feel or think.¹

DLN Reddy, sculptor

The proud, defiant vertical thrust of Untitled – symbolically a powerful male gesture – initially draws the viewer’s attention to the sculpture. But soon, the softening begins. First, the gleaming, golden glow of brass, bathes the viewer’s eye. Next, the repetitive, sensually bulbous curvilinear forms, followed by the intricately etched, subtle floral designs that decoratively clothe the alluringly ambiguous structure. The 250cm x 45cm x 45cm sculpture weaves its visual wonder not only through its beguiling tension of opposing gender metaphors, but by its ability to suggest the figurative, through structural abstraction. The work shifts intriguingly in and out of abstraction and the figurative – its visual energy arises from its indefatigable jostling between the two. And there can only be one winner – the viewer.

Moreover, the sculpture evidences a hybrid dichotomy of Eastern and Western aesthetic elements. The rich rhythm of traditional Hindu sculpture is cleverly evoked through the concentric, cascading repetition of inverted vase forms – of differing diameters – stepped at varying distances along the upper half of the piece. These cocoon and echo the two lower conic forms – the second being larger than the lower – that rise gracefully like ancient Grecian pythoi which once protectively held precious honey, olive oil, or grains. The upper half of the sculpture seems to float above its rotund tapered sentinels below, igniting an almost spiritual sense of wonder that lingers in the suspended space between knowing and feeling. The geometric is delightfully at play here in the interlocking of both
form and line to generate a visually entertaining unified mass. In form, line and mass, Reddy has also articulated his personal interest in perhaps the most seminal of Western Modernist art movements – Cubism. The figurative sculpture has been constructed as an abstraction of the human form based upon the distorted proportions of concentrically overlapping and intersecting masses. A traditional representation of reality has been abandoned in favour of the pursuit of a new ethereal reality. Although the tilted cylindrical form atop of the sculpture breaks with the piece's straight vertical climb, the initial humour it generates is quickly subdued by the realisation that here too Reddy has paid homage to Cubism – the harmony of line has been sharply fractured.

The surface of the sculpture's form is adorned with floral motifs. The intimate play upon the piece's skin is reminiscent of fine lace work – fluid in line, but rigid in patterning. Reddy certainly wants the viewer to be initially consumed by the work's form, but through the surface he snares our desire for intricate visual movement and energy. The viewer's eye darts along the crisscrossing curvilinear patterns, enjoying the rich changing detail, and the subtlety and precision of delicately etched lines. Like its form, the sculpture's surface embraces visual transformation.

By jumping in and out between the figurative and abstraction, DLN Reddy's Untitled connects us to our constantly evolving selves – our identities are multiple and they are forever in flux. Nothing is fixed.

Leonard Janiszewski

Query: how to combine belief that the world is to a great extent illusory with belief that it is nonetheless essential to improve the illusion?

Aldous Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936)

On the field of Truth, on the battlefield of life II is the second instalment in my ongoing project of interpretation and reflection from reading the *Bhagavad Gita*. This particular study draws heavily on Huxley’s *Eyeless in Gaza*, and specifically the central protagonist’s journal entries of 1934, writings which illustrate one man’s search for meaning in life and the quest for real liberty. In the interplay of these two texts and at the crossroads of the self I heard echoes of Arjuna’s beseech to Krishna: ‘Ah! Yet again recount...’

*Sangeeta Sandrasegar*

Sangeeta Sandrasegar: A Search for Meaning and Truth on the Battlefield

Sangeeta Sandrasegar enacts multiple pathways along the socio-political and cultural landscape producing works of a deeply profound nature. The work *In The field of Truth, on the battlefield of life II* is the second one in this series derived from the metaphorical links the artist has made between her interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* with that of Aldous Huxley’s work *Eyeless in Gaza*.

The *Bhagavad Gita*’s worldwide impact has opened the ground for self-discovery and spiritual awakening in both the Eastern and Western worlds – aiding cross-cultural connections to translate across the globe binding people and nations. The *Bhagavad Gita* follows the discourse that transpired between the immortals, Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna, when standing on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, near New Delhi, in about the year 3100 BCE. Lord Krishna is deliberating on a range of philosophical matters, imparting wisdom and knowledge that will lead an anxious Arjuna onto a spiritual pathway of liberation in knowing and accepting his true duties in life under the direction of God. Greatly influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*, Huxley ruminates on the search for meaning, striving for the pursuit of happiness, being good and compassionate throughout one’s life, and the reduced importance of intellectual pursuits.

Sandrasegar’s work *In the field of Truth, on the battlefield of life II* is a conceptual visualisation of those philosophical contemplations congruous from the sources of both the *Bhagavad Gita* and Huxley’s novel. Analogies are also drawn to the state of becoming and being an artist – sustaining that practice under neo-capitalist conditions can prove an obstacle of the will in order to remain on that pathway. The economic pressures of daily living can dictate the life we lead. Sandrasegar is exploring the processes of making those choices within the dual context of our existence. Amid the discernible conflict of the
will, one can easily falter to miss one’s true ‘calling’ in life, which in turn, sours to resentment, turmoil, unrest and unhappiness – the battlefield of life.

The Chinese were the first to deploy making helmets out of paper mache to be used in the battlefield during the second century CE. The material proved to be light, yet strong, reinforced by the many layers of lacquer applied over the top of each helmet. Sandrasegar utilises paper-mâché in crafting the eyeless heads, albeit with stylised features that emulates Buddha. The vestiges of the eye lowered in contemplation, the works preserve an eerie human presence – fragile and porcelain-like, they emit an ephemeral beauty that turns a hypnotic aura. The installation creates effects of shadow and light the levitation of which, interplays with our perceptions of reality, fiction and myth – all three interweave to create this dialogue on the battlefield. Mask-like, the installation echoes shadow puppetry with interconnecting threads that create oscillating linear patterns. As such, the work transmits a performative quality that effects manifold temporalities where the past, present and future are compressed at all three trajectories.

We are told that technology has increased our productivity and opened up an array of choices and endless possibilities. But has this situation thwarted our search for inner peace and truth? Do we have enough time to embrace the metaphysical/spiritual life that offers to alleviate the pain and anxiety of our daily lives against the backdrop of a globalised, connected world?

Considering, the ontological nature of Sangeeta Sandrasegar’s work allows us to experience the world arising out of an authenticity that defies the battlefield of life.

**Rhonda Davis**
above:
Sangeeta Sandrasegar
**On the field of Truth, on the battlefield of life II (Image detail)**
2009
paper-mâché, thread, glue, acrylic paint, human hair
dimensions variable
Image courtesy of the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne
Photograph John Brash
above:
Sangeeta Sandrasegar
On the field of Truth, on the battlefield of life II
2009
paper-mâché, thread, glue, acrylic paint, human hair
dimensions variable
Image courtesy of the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne
Photograph John Brash
above:
Sangeeta Sandrasegar

*On the field of Truth, on the battlefield of life II (Image detail)*

2009

paper-mâché, thread, glue, acrylic paint, human hair
dimensions variable

Image courtesy of the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne
Photograph John Brash
Mao Zedong launched an ‘anti-rightist movement’ in 1957, which was to purge the intellectuals, and suppress freedom of speech completely. More than 550,000 intellectuals were branded as rightists and sent to labor camps. Large numbers died as a result of starvation, excessive physical exertion, and suicide. This was a major turning point. Since then no one dared to criticise those in power.

Despite the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the Chinese authority abandoned the class struggle theory, allowing the development of industry and production. It led to a rapid development of the Chinese economy within a short space of 30 years. China became the second largest economy in the world. But this did not take China along the road to democracy, the rule of law and constitution. People still have no freedom of speech. The result is that the national wealth has been taken illicitly by the rich and powerful group; the gap between the rich and the poor has increased and corruption is rampant everywhere. Authority is dependent on the control of speech and force to ‘maintain the stability’.

In recent years, I have interviewed more than 100 elderly rightist people ranging in age from 70 to over 90 years. They are the survivors of the catastrophe from the previous movements. These people eyewitnessed and experienced for more than half a century the damage and peril caused by the modern ‘Fen-shu-keng-ru’ (burn books and bury alive the intellectuals by Qin Emperor) to Chinese civilisation. I have chosen not to paint portraits of China’s ‘great men’, but rather, in order to ensure they are not forgotten, the rightists.

Xu Wang
Breaking the Silence: Xu Wang

It has been a struggle to find adequate words to express the poignant beauty of raw human emotion and resolute conviction which is expressed in every stroke that Xu Wang lays upon his canvasses – illuminating the faces of those who have remained nameless and unknown to us for too long. The quiet dignity of Xu Wang’s people are in stark contrast to the overwhelming rhetoric and visual reminders of China’s national pride – such as a space program, high-speed rail networks, or the world fair and Olympics of 2008 – that regularly appear splashed across our newspapers and television screens.

For the longest time, artistic and written populist portrayals of the impacts of political history on the marginalised, poor or ordinary citizen have been largely ignored, unrecorded. Previously, the focus had been on leaders, policies, alliances, wars and treaties. In Australia we are all very aware that we too have taken a long time to start to address the inequalities within our own society. Xu Wang’s artistic expression is powerful in the way it disseminates the visualisation of complex ideas in an accessible way; it offers us the chance to learn from each other, to mourn together for past injustices, and also to move forward together.

‘Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred opinions contend’ – the responses to this proclamation by Mao Zedong in 1957 eventually led to the systematic silencing and labelling as ‘Rightists’ of many thousands of peoples. Decades later, Xu Wang is addressing this imbalance and, giving back both a face and a voice to the silenced intellectuals whose only crime was to speak out and have an opinion. The video-recorded oral histories that Xu Wang personally collected and filmed this year accompany this powerful series of highly sensitive portraits. This is the first public screening of Wang’s film which gives a voice back to those who have been rendered voiceless in the past. They remind us too, that these people are our contemporaries – still re-living these memories, day in and day out.

Gina Hammond
above:
Xu Wang
100 Portraits of Rightists
2010
acrylic and oil on board
60.0 x 45.0 cm each panel
Courtesy of the artist
left:
detail (four individual portraits)

Xu Wang

100 Portraits of Rightists

2010

acrylic and oil on board

60.0 x 45.0 cm each panel

Courtesy of the artist
Guan Wei

On Clouds – Harmony, joy and lightness in the pursuit of happiness

The work of artist Guan Wei embodies a navigation between the social and environmental dilemmas of our time. His carefully chosen subject matter creates a seemingly effortless balance between opposing ideas, rich in the socio-political iconography born of Guan’s experience between the contrasting reality of life in China and his new life in Australia. The three recurring elements of wisdom, knowledge and humour continually demonstrate his internal journey in the campaign for the eradication of sadness and worry in the pursuit of happiness driven by a pure heart and mind, a philosophy informed by his Buddhist ideals. Until the 20th century, Buddhism was the only religion assimilated into Chinese civilisation pitted against a Chinese philosophy that was deeply pragmatic – influenced by the Confucius and Taoism ideals of family, civic duty, harmoniousness and concord with the natural order.¹

Born in 1957, Guan Wei continues this contemporary dialogue. From his cloud, Guan drives the central notion of harmony – a concept with its necessary practical dimension – to create a pure land on earth informed by man’s pure heart that will in turn influence pure behaviour. This is passed on until the Buddhist pure land is realised here on earth – in the images of floating clouds, the blue of the sea, and the calm of nature – to emphasise our need to choose from the many different cultural traditions that confront us everyday, to be open to the diversity of the world; yet with the humour necessary to counterfoil its tensions and warm the heart.

Chinese art underwent a revolution during the 20th century with Chinese history turning a new page after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in October 1949. However, the Cultural Revolution was as much about power struggles as it was about revolutionary principles with a move away from Maoist ideology after the Chairman’s death in 1976. The Democracy Wall movement, economic reform and open foreign policy created the opportunity for underground movements in art to emerge.

In 1986, Guan Wei graduated from Beijing’s Capital University, he was in his early 20s and determined to go his own way. The passion of expatriates in the capital for collecting ‘dissident’ art tended, incidentally, to sideline artists cultivating a more personal vision. Wei’s work at this time, though full of the usual oblique references to the oppression of the times still contained a humour that set his work apart from many of his contemporaries.²
New ideological trends began to emerge during the last three decades of the 20th century with artists breaking free from the purely realistic styles such as ink-and-wash painting to openly borrow from Western art and experiment with modernist practices that re-examined the traditional ways of practice. This reformation took place informed by abstraction and expressionism and became the backdrop for artists such as Guan Wei throughout this period to be educated into Western modes of practice. As a student, Guan was required to master the painting styles of each period and this influence is evident in his scroll-like work presented in a surrealist style. Yet, it is his ability to combine wit (humour) that makes his work so appealing to Australian audiences combining his visual language with a highly graphic style.

Guan Wei first visited Australia in 1989 taking up a three-month residency at the Tasmanian School of Art. His return to Beijing at that time was life-changing. As witness to the protests that began in April 1989 around public demonstrations of mourning for former Communist Party Secretary General Hu Yaobang, it ended in the massacre of 7000 people in Tiananmen Square under the eyes of the world in June 1989, placing Guan and all artists at risk. The Tasmanian School of Art sponsored Guan Wei’s return back to Australia where he was successfully admitted under the Distinguished Talent Scheme in 1990 with his wife joining him in 1992. Guan Wei’s artistic response, the 48-piece series in gouache, Two Finger Exercises, is his most overtly political work. In it, protestor’s with their fingers extended in the V-for-victory sign communicate the sense of rowdy innocence and exuberance on the streets of Beijing, before the tanks moved in.³

There is little doubt that China in the 21st century will maintain its dynamic growth and could become the largest economy in the world by 2030. This is likely to contain its current dynamism and it is artists like Guan Wei who lead the challenge for cultural reform and the importance of harmony, humour and understanding as fundamental points of orientation in that journey.

Dr Edwina Marks


³ Ibid
above:
Guan Wei
On Clouds No. 1
2008
acrylic on linen
130.0 x 80.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Martin Browne Contemporary
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite

above:
Guan Wei
On Clouds No. 2
2008
acrylic on linen
130.0 x 80.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Martin Browne Contemporary
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
above:
Guan Wei
On Clouds No. 3
2008
acrylic on linen
130.0 x 80.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Martin Browne Contemporary
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite

above:
Guan Wei
Cloud P#3
2012
bronze
Ed. 2/3
160.0 x 100.0 x 90.0 cm
Collection Gary Sands
Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite
List of works

Pablo Bartholomew  
**Chinese Indians or Indian Chinese series**  
*Tangra, Calcutta*  
c.1975  
inkjet black and white photographs  
23.57 x 15.57 cm each  
Courtesy of the artist

Kate Beynon  
**Lotus Qi Gong Goddess**  
2010  
acrylic & Swarovski crystals on linen  
100.0 cm diameter  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Kate Beynon  
**Big Dragon Guardian**  
2009  
acrylic and aerosol on canvas  
150.0 x 150.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 6**  
2008  
91.44 x 91.44 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 8**  
2012  
121.92 x 121.92 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 9**  
2012  
91.44 x 91.44 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Dongwang Fan  
**Dragon In Water**  
2012  
acrylic on canvas  
180.0 x 428.0 cm overall triptych  
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Clayton Gallery, Sydney

Dongwang Fan  
**Dragon In Water**  
2012  
one screen audio-video work  
duration 10 minutes  
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Clayton Gallery, Sydney

Kate Beynon  
**Big Dragon Guardian**  
2009  
acrylic and aerosol on canvas  
150.0 x 150.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 3**  
2006  
76.2 x 76.2 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 4**  
2012  
121.92 x 121.92 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 5**  
2012  
121.92 x 121.92 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 7**  
2012  
91.44 x 91.44 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 8**  
2012  
121.92 x 121.92 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Shobha Broota  
**Untitled No. 9**  
2012  
91.44 x 91.44 cm  
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Dongwang Fan  
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Dongwang Fan  
**Dragon In Water**  
2012  
one screen audio-video work  
duration 10 minutes  
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Clayton Gallery, Sydney

A grandmother in traditional clothes  
Boy jumping off a rooftop  
Buying flowers in the morning market  
Chinese girl with flowers in the market  
Chinese men on scooters  
Chinese New Year party  
Chinese girl on cycle  
Chinese women cooking inside a family restaurant  
Chinese youth with Bruce Lee poster  
Chinese party  
Curing of leather inside a tannery yard  
Getting ready to go the market  
Inside a tannery  
Leather washing apparatus  
Mincing pork inside a house  
Overview of Tangra area at sunset  
Piles of leather sheets  
Rickshaw puller  
Smoggy winter streets  
The Chinese temple  
The gate of a tannery  
Two Chinese housewives talk  
Workers at leather washing drums  
Workers carry leather sheets on their heads  
Workers loading unprocessed leather  
Young workers taking a break  
Overview of Tangra area at sunset  
Piles of leather sheets  
Rickshaw puller  
Smoggy winter streets  
The Chinese temple  
The gate of a tannery  
Two Chinese housewives talk  
Workers at leather washing drums  
Workers carry leather sheets on their heads  
Workers loading unprocessed leather  
Young workers taking a break

Katie Beynon  
**Lotus Qi Gong Goddess**  
2010  
acrylic & Swarovski crystals on linen  
100.0 cm diameter  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Kate Beynon  
**Big Dragon Guardian**  
2009  
acrylic and aerosol on canvas  
150.0 x 150.0 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Li Li
The Destruction of 100,000 Tons No. 1
2005
acrylic on canvas
130.0 x 180.0 cm
Courtesy of The Hughes Gallery, Sydney

Li Li
What is Natural? No. 2
2006
acrylic on canvas
100.0 x 120.0 cm
 Courtesy of The Hughes Gallery, Sydney

DLN Reddy
Untitled
2011
brass
250.0 x 45.0 x 45.0 cm
On loan to Macquarie University Sculpture Park
 Courtesy of the artist

Sangeeta Sandrasegar
On the field of Truth, on the battlefield of life II
2009
paper-mâché, thread, glue, acrylic paint, human hair
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist
and Murray White Room, Melbourne

Xu Wang
100 Portraits of Rightists
2010
acrylic and oil on board
60.0 x 45.0 cm each panel
Courtesy of the artist

Xu Wang
My Story
2012
two-screen audio-video work
Courtesy of the artist

Guan Wei
On Clouds No. 1
2008
acrylic on linen
130.0 x 80.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Martin Browne Contemporary

Guan Wei
On Clouds No. 2
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acrylic on linen
130.0 x 80.0 cm
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bronze
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such an outstanding design for this catalogue.
left: DLN Reddy

Untitled

2011

brass

250.0 x 45.0 x 45.0 cm

On loan to Macquarie University Sculpture Park

Image taken in situ at the Macquarie University Sculpture Park

Courtesy of the artist

Photograph Effy Alexakis, Photowrite